WHEN POWER STOPPED BEING MALE

WOMEN, POLITICS, AND THE RETURN OF THE PERSONAL

FROM THE QUEEN'S CHAMBER TO THE SMARTPHONE:
HOW WOMEN RECLAIMED POWER AND REWROTE ITS MEANING.

The history of women and political power is often told as a simple progression. Women were excluded, women fought for rights, women entered parliament and government, and equality gradually displaced patriarchy. The story is not false, but it is much too clean. Women exercised political power long before they possessed political equality, while the modernization of politics did not merely open doors to them. In some respects, it closed old ones before new ones became available.

A medieval queen could possess enormous influence without possessing anything resembling modern citizenship. A nineteenth-century woman could live in a society speaking confidently about liberty and universal rights while remaining unable to vote. A twentieth-century female prime minister might reach the highest office yet still have to prove that femininity was compatible with command. A contemporary woman in power, by contrast, may sometimes allow gender to recede almost entirely, while another may deliberately turn motherhood, femininity and personal identity into political language. The more revealing history is therefore not

simply the story of women acquiring power. It is the story of power changing its relationship to sex.

For centuries, maleness was not merely common among rulers. It was woven into the cultural image of legitimate command. What eventually changed was not that power became sexless, but that sex became less capable of dictating what political authority had to look like.

Power Before Equality

Eleanor of Aquitaine, who lived from 1122 to 1204, was not politically powerful because medieval Europe had developed an enlightened understanding of female equality. It had done nothing of the kind. Her world was dynastic, hierarchical and patriarchal. Yet Eleanor possessed lands of enormous strategic value, married two kings, became the mother of future rulers and moved through political networks linking courts, territories and families across Europe. Politics did not sit neatly apart from family life; it travelled through it.

Marriage could be diplomacy, motherhood could become succession politics, a widow might control estates, and a queen could intercede with a king. A regent might govern for an underage son, while access to the ruler's household could matter almost as much

as membership of a formal council because the distinction between household, dynasty and government remained porous. Blanche of Castile demonstrated this clearly when she governed France as regent after the death of Louis VIII in 1226. She ruled on behalf of her young son, the future Louis IX, not because medieval France had concluded that women were legitimate political actors in general, but because dynasty created a particular route into authority.

Women as a class were not politically liberated by the flexibility of dynastic politics. Most remained profoundly subordinate. Yet some elite women could exercise considerable power precisely because government had not yet been separated cleanly from inheritance, kinship, property, marriage and household life. The arrangement was contradictory: a woman could be legally and socially subordinate while politically indispensable.

Her power was also precarious. Women who exercised too much authority could quickly become the schemer, the adulteress, the foreign corrupter or the unnatural mother. The particular accusation changed, but the pattern remained familiar. Female authority

required explanation, and excessive female authority could be made to appear morally suspicious. Nevertheless, the political system contained openings because power itself remained embedded in relationships that crossed what modernity would later define as the boundary between public and private life.

Then Europe began reconstructing politics itself, and some of those older routes narrowed.

The Universal Citizen Who Turned Out to Be Male

The French Revolution of 1789 announced a radical transformation in political legitimacy. Authority would no longer rest principally upon dynasty or inherited rank. Sovereignty belonged to the people, and citizens possessed rights because they were citizens rather than because they had been born into particular estates. The language appeared universal, and women noticed the problem almost immediately.

Women marched to Versailles in October 1789, wrote, petitioned, attended political meetings and organized clubs. In 1791 Olympe de Gouges published her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*, exposing the obvious contradiction in a political revolution proclaiming universal rights

while treating the political subject as male. The contradiction soon became institutional. Women's political clubs were banned in 1793, and Napoleon's Civil Code of 1804 reinforced patriarchal authority within marriage and family life.

Something historically peculiar had happened. The ancien régime had been profoundly unequal, yet elite women could sometimes exercise political influence because dynasty, household and government overlapped. The new order dismantled aristocratic privilege and declared political rights universal, but the supposedly abstract citizen was in practice a man. Modern politics therefore did not simply expand an existing political sphere. It redrew the sphere itself.

Politics became increasingly associated with formal institutions, law, bureaucracy, parliament, administration and a public arena conceived as distinct from domestic life. At the same time, womanhood became culturally associated with the complementary world of family, morality, intimacy, emotion and home. The nineteenth-century wife of a parliamentarian might share his bed, household, worries and much of his private political conversation while possessing no vote of her own. A medieval

queen might have reached power through the household; the modern household had increasingly been defined as the place politics supposedly was not.

There was genuine progress in the replacement of inherited privilege by citizenship, but there was also a new form of exclusion. Political authority was becoming less dependent upon birth and private access while women had not yet been admitted equally into the institutions replacing those older routes. Modernity had universalized the idea of political citizenship before it universalized the people allowed to possess it.

From Exceptional Woman to Ordinary Citizen

The nineteenth century intensified the distinction between public and private even as reality constantly violated it. Women worked in factories, farms, shops, schools, hospitals and publishing. They participated in reform movements and revolutions. Yet the cultural fiction remained powerful: public life belonged to men, while women belonged to domesticity.

Queen Victoria, whose reign lasted from 1837 to 1901, embodied the absurdity elegantly. A woman stood symbolically at the summit of the British Empire while ordinary women remained excluded

from political citizenship. By the later nineteenth century, however, the contradiction became harder to sustain. Women were increasingly educated, earning wages, organizing political movements and obtaining greater property rights. If they obeyed laws, paid taxes and participated in public life, why should they remain excluded from making those laws?

The suffrage movement therefore represented something very different from the strategies available to a medieval queen. The medieval woman had to ask what influence could be exercised from the position into which dynasty, marriage or inheritance had placed her. The feminist demand was more radical: why should political personhood depend upon exceptional access at all? The queen possessed power because she was exceptional; the citizen demanded rights precisely because she was not.

During the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the formal institutional barrier gradually fell. New Zealand granted women the parliamentary vote in 1893. Finland extended full political rights, including eligibility for parliament, in 1906. Denmark enfranchised women for parliamentary elections in 1915. Britain enfranchised many women in 1918 and

established equal voting terms with men in 1928, while France followed in 1944. The door had opened, but entering the institution did not immediately change the cultural meaning of authority.

Thatcher and the Translation Problem

Margaret Thatcher became Britain's first female prime minister in 1979. What makes her historically interesting is not merely that she was a woman who reached the office, but the way she negotiated a symbolic contradiction that remained attached to female power. How could a woman embody political hardness in a culture where command, war, confrontation and decisive authority were still coded overwhelmingly as masculine?

Thatcher's political persona did not solve the problem by erasing femininity. Instead, she combined visible femininity with an exceptionally hard performance of political authority. Hair, pearls, dresses, handbag and carefully trained voice existed alongside union confrontation, economic restructuring, party discipline, sovereignty and the Falklands War. The resulting image was captured perfectly by the title attached to her: the **Iron Lady**.

The phrase exposes the cultural problem it was trying to solve. The “lady” required “iron” because female authority still needed translation into hardness. Churchill did not need to become the Iron Gentleman; masculinity already carried the symbolic possibility of command. Thatcher therefore represented an important transitional form. She demonstrated that visible femininity could coexist with supreme political authority, but the coexistence was still treated as remarkable.

A female prime minister implicitly had to answer questions male leaders rarely faced in the same way. Could she command generals, dominate male colleagues and survive confrontation? Could she appear decisive without seeming unstable, or display hardness without somehow ceasing to be recognizably feminine? Thatcher answered by making the tension itself part of her political identity. She did not escape the gendered language of authority; she mastered it so thoroughly that the contradiction became part of the brand.

A later generation of women inherited a different problem or, increasingly, no problem at all.

Frederiksen and the Ordinary Woman in Power

When Mette Frederiksen became Denmark's prime minister in 2019, the historical significance of her sex was far less dramatic than Thatcher's had been forty years earlier. That lack of drama is itself important. Frederiksen does not need to prove that women can govern a modern state. She can move from welfare policy and children to migration, military preparedness, European security and national defence without every shift appearing to cross a symbolic border between feminine and masculine politics. She does not need to become “iron.” She simply occupies authority.

This may be one of the deeper achievements of political normalization. The decisive moment is not necessarily the spectacular arrival of the first woman in office, but the moment when another woman arrives and her sex explains very little about the range of authority she can exercise. Frederiksen therefore occupies an important position between Thatcher and a figure such as Giorgia Meloni. Thatcher had to reconcile gender with command; Frederiksen can often allow gender to recede; Meloni can deliberately bring it back.

That sequence reveals something larger. Emancipation does not necessarily make gender politically irrelevant. It makes gender increasingly **optional as a political language**.

Frederiksen becomes particularly interesting when one leaves parliament and enters social media. There the prime minister is no longer encountered only as an office. She appears as a mediated person through clothes, food, domestic surroundings, personal remarks, family fragments, small jokes and glimpses of supposedly ordinary life. This does not mean the politician has become genuinely private. Quite the opposite: private life has become political material.

There is something strangely old inside this apparently new development. Medieval politics placed enormous importance on proximity. Who could reach the ruler? Who belonged to the household? Who could speak privately before the council met? Who could approach through kinship, affection or familiarity rather than formal office? Modern politics attempted to make institutional authority more impersonal through bureaucracy, parties, parliaments and professional administrations. Digital politics has

abolished none of these structures, but it has layered a new technology of proximity on top of them.

The follower is not a medieval courtier, and Instagram is not Versailles. Yet both respond to an ancient political desire: to feel close to authority, to glimpse the person behind the office and to believe that some curtain has been drawn aside. A medieval monarch staged magnificence; a twentieth-century politician staged television competence; the contemporary politician increasingly stages intimacy.

Women have a peculiar historical relationship to this return because female political legitimacy has always been unusually entangled with the body, clothing, sexuality, marriage, motherhood and private conduct. Modern politics tried, at least theoretically, to push such things outside the formal sphere. The smartphone quietly invites them back in.

Meloni and the Return of Womanhood

Giorgia Meloni, who became Italy's first female prime minister in 2022, makes this reversal especially visible. Unlike Frederiksen, Meloni does not allow gender merely to recede into political normality. She actively gives womanhood ideological meaning. Her public identity has emphasized being a woman, a

mother, an Italian and a Christian. These are not merely facts about her biography; they form part of a political vocabulary through which she speaks about family, national identity, tradition and belonging.

At first glance, this might look like a return to an older model of femininity. Historically, however, something stranger has happened. Meloni is not powerful because she is a wife, queen, widow, regent or dynastic mother. She does not derive access to government from a familial relationship with a powerful man. She already possesses autonomous political authority, and from that position she chooses to make motherhood and womanhood politically meaningful.

The direction of power has reversed. Eleanor of Aquitaine's gendered and dynastic relationships helped place her near authority; Meloni acquires authority independently and then decides what political meaning her gendered identity should carry. That is not a return to medieval politics. It is a distinctly contemporary possibility made available by emancipation itself.

There is an irony here that deserves to remain unresolved. Feminist movements helped dismantle the

structures preventing women from becoming autonomous political actors. A politician such as Meloni can walk through the institutional door opened by that emancipation and then use her autonomy to challenge feminist interpretations of womanhood. This is not necessarily evidence that emancipation failed. It may, perversely enough, be evidence that it worked.

If women are genuinely autonomous political actors, they cannot be politically free only when they adopt approved forms of female politics. A society that expects every successful woman politician to embody feminism still treats women as representatives of their sex in a way it rarely demands of men. Political normalization therefore includes the freedom to become conservative, socialist, nationalist, liberal, religious, secular, feminist, anti-feminist, competent, mediocre, inspiring, disastrous or simply boring. Women acquire, in other words, one of the oldest male political privileges: the right not to symbolize all women.

Clothes Were Always Political

Digital politics also makes the body difficult to ignore, although the body never really left politics in the first

place. Clothing once belonged openly to the theatre of authority. Elizabeth I used dress, jewels and bodily presentation as part of an elaborate language of sovereignty, while Louis XIV transformed ceremony, architecture and costume into political technologies at Versailles. Modern democratic politics claimed greater sobriety. Dark suits, neutral offices and professional presentation suggested that the body had retreated behind the institution, but it never really had.

Thatcher's handbag, pearls, hairstyle and voice were political because they helped construct a recognizable form of authority. Meloni's clothing and bodily presentation operate in a media environment where visual interpretation occurs constantly and instantly. A photograph can communicate discipline, warmth, ordinariness, professionalism, motherhood or nationalism before a speech has even been heard. Politics has not suddenly become superficial; politics has always depended partly upon surfaces because surfaces carry meaning.

Elizabeth I understood this, as did Louis XIV, Napoleon, Kennedy and Thatcher. Contemporary politicians merely inhabit a technology that distributes such meanings continuously. Versailles required

architecture, television required a studio, and Instagram requires a thumb. The technology changes. The political usefulness of appearance does not.

After Normalization

Frederiksen and Meloni therefore represent two quite different possibilities produced by the same historical transformation. Frederiksen suggests that gender can become less explanatory: her sex does not need to account for her authority or define the range of political registers available to her. Meloni demonstrates that once female authority has become sufficiently normalized, femininity itself can be deliberately reactivated as political symbolism. One allows gender to recede; the other chooses to foreground it.

Neither position would have been possible in precisely the same way under older political orders. This is why describing contemporary politics as simply “post-feminist” is too crude. Female emancipation did not eliminate gender as a political force. It weakened the compulsory relationship between gender and legitimate authority.

That gives women something more interesting than mere access to office. It gives them interpretive

power. They can increasingly decide whether womanhood should matter politically and, if so, how. For centuries, political culture largely told women what their sex meant for their access to authority. Now a woman in authority can participate in defining what her sex means politically. The choice may be feminist, conservative, strategic or almost absent. The important change is that the meaning is no longer imposed in quite the same way from outside.

This is also why the history does not resemble a clean march from gendered politics toward genderless politics. Gender has not disappeared. Instead, its political function has changed. What was once a structural restriction can become a symbolic resource; what once automatically disqualified can now be emphasized, minimized, reinvented or strategically ignored. Emancipation has not ended the politics of gender. It has made that politics less predictable.

From the Queen's Chamber to the Smartphone

Seen across the centuries, the history resembles less a straight line than a spiral. The medieval political world allowed certain elite women to exercise influence because dynasty, property, kinship, intimacy and government overlapped. Modern politics

gradually separated public authority from those relationships and constructed a formal political sphere that initially defined the citizen as male. Feminist movements fought their way into that sphere, while the first generations of women who reached supreme office still had to negotiate its masculine symbolic language.

Thatcher made femininity compatible with hardness. Frederiksen represents a stage at which female authority can become sufficiently ordinary that gender often requires little explanation. Meloni reveals the next paradox: once female authority no longer depends upon suppressing or justifying womanhood, womanhood itself can return as a political resource chosen by the woman who already possesses power.

At the same time, digital politics is making political authority personal again. The public and private spheres have not collapsed, but their boundary has become porous. Political leaders enter kitchens through phones. Families become campaign imagery, clothes become arguments, and personal stories become ideological signals. Followers are offered tiny pieces of apparent intimacy with people they may never meet. The medieval queen and the politician

posting on Instagram are obviously not the same political creature, but both reveal something modern political theory periodically forgets: power is never merely constitutional.

Power moves through institutions, laws and offices, certainly, but also through bodies, images, relationships, stories, symbols and perceived access. Human beings do not encounter authority only as an administrative structure; they encounter somebody inhabiting it. In this sense, the digital age has not simply carried politics forward into a technologically novel future. It has also recovered older political forms—proximity, personality, bodily symbolism and staged intimacy—and inserted them into democratic institutions that were once imagined as increasingly impersonal.

Women entered this changing world first as exceptions, then as citizens, then as political professionals. What followed was not the disappearance of sex from politics, but something more interesting. For centuries, the central question was whether a woman could possess legitimate political power at all. Later, women such as Thatcher still had to demonstrate that they could exercise power

without ceasing, symbolically, to be women. Today that relationship has become less predictable. A woman in power may allow gender to disappear almost completely from the explanation of her authority, or she may make motherhood central to her political identity. She may perform femininity, reject it, reinterpret it, politicize it or simply allow everyone to forget about it for an afternoon.

Power has not lost its sex. Sex has lost some of its power to tell authority what it must look like.